SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 'ISRĀ' - MI'RĀJ IN SUFISM

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The Spiritual Voyage and the Heavenly Ascension of Muḥammad, known in Islamic terminology as the Isrā'-Mi'rāj, is considered by Muslims in general as a unique event in the religious history of mankind and as an unforeseen miraculous achievement exclusively belonging to him. But the Sūfīs in general consider it as the climax of all spirituality or in other words, as the ultimate state of Tawḥīd, totally realized by the Prophet of Islam, but unrealized and unrealizable by any other prophet or angel. Most Sūfī masters specially deal with it from different angles of vision dwelling on the deepest meaning of its various aspect and dimensions. In this manner, there has developed a comprehensive doctrine concerning the Isrā'-Mi'rāj among the Sūfīs, a doctrine profoundly rich in spiritual knowledge and wisdom.

One would commit a great mistake, if one considered it as a mere journey from one place to another or equate it with the space-flight of modern technological man. In fact, it is essentially a prototypal Voyage, at once physical and spiritual, terrestrial and celestial, ascending beyond the earthly domain of time and space. In other words, it is a totally realized journey, both intellectually and ontologically, traversing all the existential gradations and hierarchies, culminating in a decisive and blissful meeting between the human and the Divine, or between Muḥammad and Allāh, the Lord of all worlds. The profoundest significance of this meeting lies in the fact that the spiritual physical presence of the Prophet before Allāh denotes, on the one hand, the restoration of the paradisal state or direct link with Allāh, which was broken with expulsion of Adam from Heaven, and indicates, on the other hand, the physical resurrection of mankind. In short, the Isrā'-Mi'rāj is a total and all-comprehensive Voyage and it, therefore, prefigures symbolically all the possible aspects of Islam, the Sharī'ah and Tarīqah, the terrestrial and

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the celestial, the Here and Hereafter etc. Just as the Isrā'-Mi'rāj starts from the earthly Ka'bah and ends in the Heavenly Ka'bah (the 'Arsh or the Throne of Allāh), of which the earthly Ka'bah is a symbolic reflection, so Islam too starts with Allāh and ends with Him. In other words, the Journey of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj represents, in a deeper sense, the ultimate pilgrimage towards Allāh, in relation to which the earthly pilgrimage is a symbolic imitation. For in the pilgrimage to the Ka'bah, a person moves from his home to the Ka'bah, but in the Isrā'-Mi'rāj, the Prophet moved from the Ka'bah towards Allāh, who is the Lord of the Ka'bah.

It simultaneously constitutes, on the other hand, a pilgrimage towards one's own inwards Ka'bah or towards the trans-personal depth of one's own heart which is the Ka'bah of the heart, the Seat of Allāh. Likewise, the Journey of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj represents, in a deeper sense, the Greater Holy War, al-Jihād al-Akbar, referred to by the Prophet in a famous Hadīth[1], against the seducible soul and the seductive world; in other words, it implies a greater war of the soul, in search of Allāh, through 70,000 veils of light and darkness that hide Allāh from us. Likewise again, this Journey represents, not only symbolically but also essentially, the ritual prayer (Salāt) in its ultimate possible form or in its prototype form of which our daily ritual prayer is a mere imitation. For the Journey of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj, ultimately resulted in a direct meeting with Allāh, an experience of Eternity and Infinity and of Paradise. This supreme experience is possible to be actualized by everyone in ritual prayers, also through the realization of Iḥsān (an act of total submission with undivided attention). This is what is asserted in a famous Sūfī Hadith:

> "The Ritual Prayer amounts to the Heavenly Ascension of the believers".[2]

The Isrā'-Mi'rāj, thus, prefigures all the possible aspect of Islam. It is, therefore, at once physical and spiritual, terrestrial and celestial, exoteric and esoteric, microcosmic and macrocosmic etc. With these prefatory remarks, we now turn to the discussion of the doctrine of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj as expounded in Sūfism.

THE MEANING OF THE 'ISRĀ' - MI'RĀJ

The terms Isrā'-Mi'rāj together denote the spiritual journey of the Prophet as a whole starting from Makkah right up to the Divine Presence. But the term Isrā' itself means that Allāh has caused His servant (the Prophet) to journey overnight from the sacred Mosque (al-Masjid al-Harām) at Makkah to the Furthest Mosque (al-Masjid al-Aqsā) at Jerusalem in order to show him His signs. The Qur'ān refers to this expressly:[3]

> "Glory to Allāh, who did take His servant for a journey by night, from the scared Mosque to the Furthest Mosque, whose precints We did bless, so that We might show him Our signs" (17:1)

The term Mi'rāj itself, on the other hand, signifies the Heavenly Ascension of the Prophet from Jerusalem, passing through degrees of the heavens, even beyond the Lote Tree of the Utmost Boundary (al-Sidrat al-Muntahā) and ultimately reaching the Divine Presence and enjoying the Supreme Contiguity and Direct Communication with Allāh . This has been alluded to in the Qur'ān:

> "Then He revealed to His servant what He revealed, his (the Prophet's) heart did not falsify what he saw! ... when there enshrouded the Lote Tree that which enshroudeth, his eye wavered not, nor did it transgress. Verily he beheld, of all the signs of his Lord, the greatest." (53:10-18).

The Isrā' thus implies a horizontal journey of the Prophet across this visible and phenomenal universe which is called in Islamic terminology as 'Ālam al-Mulk wa al-Shahādah; the Mi'rāj, on the other hand, means a vertical journey or Heavenly Flight of the Prophet, traversing all the spiritual realms, known in the Islamic perspective as 'Ālam al-Malakūt. The former is aimed at showing the Prophet innumerable Divine signs and symbols seattered everywhere in this universe, giving witness to the unity of Allāh, the Lord of the worlds. Likewise, the latter is designed to show him the greatest sign of his Lord in the spiritual Kingdom. Mention may be made here that the Qur'ānic expression, the greatest sign, al-Āyat al-Kubrā, is interpreted by the Sūfis as the Divine Dhāt or self.[4] Thus, the spiritual journey, Isrā'-Mi'rāj of the Prophet starts by witnessing the signs and symbols and ultimately ends in witnessing the One Who is symbolized.

In other words, it is a journey from multiplicity to unity, from many to One, from the visible to the invisible and from time to Eternity. In short, the whole journey of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj constitutes a positive movement of the Prophet towards Allāh, leaving behind what is other than He. This is the ultimate state of Tawḥīd, the goal of all spirituality in Islam. This prototypal voyage thus prefigures the whole of Islam, precisely because Islam, also in a deeper and truer sense, means a positive, whole-hearted and total journey towards Allāh. As the journey of the Prophet is divided into two dimensions, Isrā' and Mi'rāj, or horizontal and vertical; likewise Islam too has two dimensions, horizontal and vertical. The horizontal dimension of Islam represent Islam on the level of law, that is Sharī'ah which holds man's will and desire in check and balance; the vertical dimension of Islam on the level of knowledge and faith, a dimension related to human intellect and spirituality. Very closely

connected with this idea is the meeting of the Prophet twice with many previous prophets in course of his journey. During the Isrā', the Prophet met many previous prophets collectively in al-Aqsā Mosque at Jerusalem where he was chosen to lead the prayer for them. This signifies that Islam is the last universal religion; the Sharī'ah of Muḥammad, peace be upon him, which is horizontal aspect of Islam, is the best and the most complete of all previous "Sharī'ahs". In it all previous "Sharī'ahs" are summarized, and the Prophet is the universally recognized leader of all the prophets. Likewise again, during his Mi'rāj, or the Heavenly Ascension, the Prophet met those prophets with whom he had prayed at Jerusalem, individually, each one in every heaven.[5] This denotes that in the spiritual hierarchy of Islam, every prophet was fixed at a particular spiritual station and accordingly every one of them was confined to a particular heaven, while the Prophet of Islam traversed all the degrees of heaven and all spiritual gradations till he reached the climax. In this context, the Sheikh Nazm al-Dīn Rāzī writes in his famous book, Mirṣād al-'Ibād:

> "The Prophet of Islam was a quick traveller traversing all spiritual states and ontological degrees which all the previous prophets had realized during their life-time, yet every one of them remained confined to a particular station. As for example, Hazrat Ādam was in the station of, 'Chosen one', Hazrat Nūh was in a station of 'invitation', Hazrat Ibrahīm was in a station of 'friendship', Hazrat Mūsā was in a station of 'dialogue', Hazrat 'Isā was in a station of word and Logos, Hazrat Dāwood was in a station of vicegerency and Hazrat Sulaimān in Kingship. But the Prophet of Islam, with Divine grace and help, crossed all these spiritual stations, surpassing all prophets and reached such a degree that no one was ever allowed and great honours were conferred on him which was not bestowed upon one ever before."[6]

This indicates that Mi'rāj corresponds to the vertical dimension of Islam, that is, Islamic spirituality. The Isrā', thus, symbolically represent Islam on the horizontal, that is, on the level of Sharī'ah, while the Mi'rāj symbolically reflect Islam on the level of Tarīqah or Islamic spirituality. The following Isrā'-Mi'rāj narrative furnishes more authority to this theme.

> "In Jerusalem, the prophets had appeared to him as they had been during their life on earth, whereas now he saw them in their celestial reality, even as they now saw him, and he marvelled at their transfiguration"[7]

This implies that in Jerusalem the Prophet saw the previous prophets in their worldly appearance or on their Sharī'ah level, whereas in heaven he saw them

in their spiritual beauty and splendour or on the level of their spiritual station. Even the basic differences between the two vehicles of this unique voyage, Burāq and the Ladder, substantiates this theme with more force. According to many authentic aḥādīth, Burāq was used for the Isra' and the Ladder was used for Mi'rāj. This is to indicate that the animal form and movement of Burāq reflect and symbolize the horizontal and terrestrial nature of the Isrā'; the Ladder, on the other hand, indicates the vertical and celestial nature of the Mi'rāj. An Isrā'-Mi'rāj narrative seems to be very appropriate here:

"According to Ibn Ishāq, a Ladder was brought for the Prophet, after he had finished the function at al-Masjid al-Aqsā while Burāq, was as usual tied to the door of that Masjid, with the help of which he reached the door of Heaven, called 'Bāb al-Hafadhah' or the door of Protection; the Prophet, however, returned to al-Masjid al-Aqsā, with the same Ladder after finishing the function of Mi'rāj and returned to Makkah with the same Burāq".[8]

Isrā' and Mi'rāj, thus, symbolically correspond to two dimensions, horizontal and vertical; two realms, terrestrial and celestial; and two aspects, the Sharī'ah and Tarīqah, of Islam. Likewise, another event which seems very significantly relevant here is that during the Isrā' in Jerusalem, two vessels were brought before the Prophet and offered to him, one of wine and other of milk. He took the vessel of milk and drank from it, but left the vessel of wine. Jibrā'īl, the Archangel, told him that he had chosen the primordial path, the happy medium or the Fitrah, that is, the primordial religion. The same event, however, was repeated during the Mi'rāj in Heaven and the Prophet again preferred milk to wine.[9]

This means that Islam alone is the primordial as well as the universal religion; it is the religion of Allāh on which mankind was originally created (see the Qur'ān, 30:30). Here the Prophet's option for milk on both the occasions of the Isrā' and Mi'rāj implies that Islam, being the primordial religion, constitutes the basis of both the aspects of religion, the Sharī'ah and the Tarīqah. There is no Sharī'ah without Islam, as there is no Tarīqah without Islam, which has always been the underlying basis of both. The Sharī'ah and the Tarīqah are, therefore, very closely, even organically connected with each other, because they are two aspects of Islam. Likewise, Isrā' and Mi'rāj are closely related and are inseparable from each other. Isrā' symbolizes Islam on the Sharī'ah or exoteric level, while the Mi'rāj represents Islam at the Tarīqah or esoteric dimension. There are many points of similarity between them. As for example, the Mi'rāj is based on the Isrā', likewise the Tarīqah is based on the Sharī'ah, the Mi'rāj begins where the Isrā' ends, the Tarīqah also begins where the Sharī'ah ends; just as there is no Mi'rāj without the Isrā', similarly there no Tarīqah without Sharī'ah. As the Isrā' is the gateway to the Mi'rāj, the Sharī'ah is the gateway to the Tarīqah. But there is no exact spiritual

demarcation line between the Isrā' and Mi'rāj, for both constitute one spiritual journey, an organic whole, since the Mi'rāj is the extension of the Isrā' or the deepest dimension of the Isrā'; in like manner, there is no exact demarcation line between the Sharī'ah and the Tarīqah, for the Tarīqah is the inward dimension of the Sharī'ah or the heart of the Sharī'ah.[10]

With these points of similarity, the Isrā'-Mi'rāj aptly pre-figures Islam as a total and comprehensive journey, both physical and spiritual, outward and inward, microcosmic and macrocosmic. In fine, the Isrā' establishes the fact that the Prophet of Islam excelled all previous Prophets by offering mankind the best way of life, that is, Sharī'ah, which is the divinely-guided comprehensive code of life. In like manner, the Mi'rāj denotes the spiritual superiority of the Prophet to all previous prophets, even to the Archangel, Jibrā'īl. According to an authentic Ḥadīth, the Archangel could not accompany the Prophet beyond the Lote Tree of the Uttermost End (sidrat al-Muntahā) and he expressed the limit of his spiritual station in the following words:

> "If I were to go one step further, I would be burned"[11]

The Qur'ān seems also to allude to this point:

> "Not one of us but he has a known station" (37:164)

That is why, beyond the domain of the Tree of the Uttermost End, the Prophet was left alone to proceed ahead and to experience the infinitely blessed meeting with Allāh, the Lord of all the worlds[12], a meeting of which the true magnitude is humanly unimaginable.

THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE AND LOVE IN THE 'ISRĀ' - MI'RĀJ

The spiritual voyage of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj culminates in the most sublime meeting between the human and the Divine or between Muḥammad, peace be upon him, and Allāh - an unprecedented voyage that has been actualized with the help of knowledge and love or what is known as Ma'rifah and Maḥabbah, in Sūfī terminology. This means that the Prophet received Divine knowledge through the revelation of the Qur'ān, a Divine knowledge that, in turn, gave birth to Divine Love in the soul of the Prophet. It was a true love, precisely because it was born of true knowledge. F. Schuon, a great contemporary authority on Sufism, has expounded this theme very clearly:

> "The Night of Power (Laïlat al-Qadar) represents the descent (Inzāl) of the Qur'ānic revelation and the Night of Spiritual Voyage (Lailat al-Mi'rāj) means the ascent of the Prophet towards the Divine Presence; the descent is an inspiration from the Divine Source, while ascent is the aspiration of the Prophetic soul; the descent is Divine grace (Raḥmah), while ascent is the human (Prophetic) effort, the content of which is the remembrance of Allāh (dhikru 'llāh)"[13].

The merciful descent of the Qur'ān is, thus, followed by the prototypal Voyage of the Prophet back to the Divine Presence.

This means that the Divine grace and mercy descended in the form of the Qur'ānic revelation which, in reality, constitutes an inexhaustible source of Divine knowledge. This Divine knowledge, in turn, evoked the most sincere Divine Love in the soul of the Prophet. It is an axiomatic truth that as the recipient of the Divine knowledge through the Qur'ān, the Prophet's knowledge and awareness of Allāh cannot be otherwise than the greatest and profoundest of all, consequently his love for Allāh must have been the purest and deepest of all. The most crucial point here is that the Prophet's love of Allāh is the most sincere, immaculate and intellectual in nature, precisely because it is born of the profoundest knowledge of Allāh and not of sentiment or emotion. In this context, most of the Sūfī masters are of the opinion that this deepest love of and yearning towards Allāh is the prime cause and the vital force for the actualization of the journey of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj. According to the Risālat al-Qushairiyah, Allāh made a comprehensive observation on the hearts of all mankind and found no heart suffering more acutely from an irresistible love for Allāh than the heart of the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him. Allāh, therefore, hastened to honour him with the highest honour by inviting him to His Presence in order to meet him.[14] The universally celebrated Sūfī poet Jalaluddin Rumi says that the Isrā'-Mi'rāj of the Prophet is the supreme reward for his most sincere love:

> "Love is the ascension towards the roof of the Prince of Beauty.
> Read the story of the ascension from the cheek of the beloved."[15]

In fact, the sincere love of the Prophet for Allāh actuated him with the spiritual aspiration (himmah) for ascending towards the presence of Allāh. For the actualization of this ascent, the Prophet pursued spiritual efforts of which the best means, according to the Qur'ān, is the constant remembrance of Allāh. The Qur'ān emphatically declares:

> "Verily the ritual prayer (the exoteric practice) prevents man from committing what is shameful and blameworthy; but verily the

remembrance (invocation) of Allāh is greater [or the greatest]"(29:45)

That is why, the dhikr or the Remembrance of Allāh is considered by the Sūfis as the weapon to wage a constant spiritual warfare against the seducible soul (al-Nafs al-Ammārah) and the seductive world (al-Dunyā al-Garūr). This spiritual warfare is called by the Prophet al-Jihād al-Akbar or the greater warfare in the famous Ḥadīth.[16] Imām al-Qushairī also describes the Remembrance of Allāh as a sword with which a traveller on the path overcomes his enemies.[17] The same idea is reiterated by al-Ghazzālī who compares dhikr to the 'Greater Jihād'.[18] Likewise, Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī also compares the dhikr with a sword, for the best formula of the dhikr, as recommended by the Prophet, is the Shahādah which, like a Divine sword, destroys the world by denying the primacy and ultimacy of everything apart from Allāh. F. Schuon says that the dhikr, which implies spiritual combat since the soul tends naturally towards the world and the passions, coincides with the Jihād, the Holy War.[19] According to him, the three words dhākir, dhikr and madhkūr - a classical ternary in Sūfism - correspond exactly to the ternary Muḥammad, Rasūl, Allāh; Muḥammad, peace be upon him, is the invoker, Rasūl the invocation, Allāh the invoked. In the invocation, the invoker and the invoked meet, just as Muḥammad, peace be upon him, and Allāh meet in the Rasūl or in the Risālah, the Message.[20] In like manner, the journey of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj constitutes a meeting between Muḥammad and Allāh. For the Prophet remembered Allāh with the total devotion and died to the world, even to himself; Allāh then remembered him by inviting him to His Utmost Proximity. This is the doctrine of mystical reciprocity to which the Qur'ān alludes expressly:

"And remember Me (Allāh), I shall remember you". (2:152)

This indicates that the Lord-servant relationship in Islam is reciprocal in nature. The above Qur'ānic verse, according to al-Qushairi, is a special gift of Allāh for the followers of the Prophet of Islam. No other people was given such a prerogative.[21] But the honour of this prerogative is reflected back upon the Prophet, because he is, in the true sense, shown honour through this prerogative. In short, the Prophet remembered Allāh with utmost sincerity: Allāh remembered him with the greatest reward by inviting him to His supreme closeness. This reciprocal relationship between Lord and servant in Islam is further confirmed by the Qur'ān in another verse:

"Is there any reward for supreme good - other than Supreme Good" (55:60)

Mention should be made here that the love of Allāh was the guiding force for the life of the Prophet. He lived for Allāh and died for Allāh and following

Qur'ānic verse constituted the true aim of his life:

> "Verily my prayer, my sacrifice, my life and my death, are for Allāh, the Absolute Lord of the Worlds" (6:163)

The Prophet's absolute devotion to Allāh found expression in his ceaseless remembrance of Allāh, so that every moment of his life was saturated with the remembrance of Allāh. According to Hazarat 'Āisha, every act of his life used to be accompanied by formula of invoking Allāh.[22] Thus, in his love for Allāh, the Prophet excelled all, his devotion to Allāh was total and his remembrance of Allāh was the sincerest of all. That is why he was rewarded with the greatest reward, that is, the Prototypal Voyage towards the Divine Presence.

This spiritual effort of the Prophet is called aspiration or himma in Sufi terminology. Sheikh Nazm al-Dīn Rāzī says that the best means for a Sufi or traveller on the path to achieve Divine nearness is himma or spiritual aspiration. With the help of himma, a Sufi may enjoy spiritual flights. By dint of himma, he may realize all good qualities to their perfection, overcoming every wishful and carnal desire evoked by the seductive world in the seducible soul and can say like Hazrat Ibrāhīm,

> "I am totally free from your wrong-doing of assigning partners to Allāh" (6:70)

Thus considering everything illusory, deceitful and therefore inimical, except Allāh, the Lord of the World:

> "For they are enemies to me, except the Lord of the Worlds,"(26:77)

he concentrates his whole attention on Allāh, the Creator of the world and submits himself totally to Him.[23] This is himmah which means to turn oneself towards Allāh whole-heartedly leaving behind what is other than Allāh. The Qur'ān alludes to this through the mouth of Hazrat Ibrāhīm:

> "Verily I have turned my face firmly to Him who originated the Heavens and the Earth, as a man of pure faith; I am not of the idolaters" (6:79).

This Himmah is indispensable for spiritual progress; it is constant spiritual effort, inward exertion and a ceaseless struggle in the way of Allāh. According to Sheikh Nazm al-Dīn Rāzī, when Himmah is perfectly and totally cultivated and actualized, a spiritual traveller (Salik) attains to the highest state of the spiritual richness. So long as the Prophet of Islam did not realize with

the help of highest himmah the state of total concentration on Allāh and absolute absorption in His remembrance, he could not gain the state of spiritual richness referred to in the Qur'ān:

> "And He found you aimless, He have you guidance, And He found you poor, He made you rich"(93:7-8)[24]

This is an allusion by the Qur'ān to highest spiritual station attained by the Prophet of Islam through the journey of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj. That is why he took lead of all the prophets and reached where even the Archangel Jibrā'īl had no access. This indicates the limit of the created order, manifested or unmanifested, which the Archangel was unable to cross, but which was crossed by the Prophet. This implies that the culminating point of that Voyage was far beyond the created order, and that it ended in the Divine Presence.[25] In this context, a Hadīth says that what the Prophet experienced of Divine Nearness is unrealized and unrealizable by any other prophet or angel.

> "I have had a time with Allāh in which no prophet and no angel can contain me except Allāh."[26]

Thus, the Prophet of Islam excelled all other prophets and all the angels, precisely because he alone realized the ultimate state of Tawḥīd, Divine Unity, through a process of unification between the descent of the Divine Revelation in the Night of Power (Laīlat al-Qadr) and the ascent of the Prophetic aspiration in the Night of Ascension (Laīlat al-Mi'rāj); the descent of the Qur'ān was followed by the ascent of the Prophet.[27] Likewise the Prophetic expression, "I have had a time with Allāh", implies that he broke through created time and came into contact with the source of time, that is, the Eternal Now of the Divine Realm.[28] Likewise, again, the prototypal Voyage of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj means that the Prophet passed through the total hierarchy of the created order, manifested and unmanifested, heaven, hell, "Bait al-Ma'mūr", the garden of ultimate Refuge, the Lote Tree of the Uttermost End, the throne of Allāh, till he reached the nearest state of the Divine Presence, when even Jibrā'īl remained far behind. This is the summit of all states, or the ultimate state of Tawḥīd. The Prophet is, therefore, unsurpassed and unsurpassable.

THE PROPHET IS UNSURPASSED AND UNSURPASSABLE

To emphasize the highest and the ultimate spiritual station of the Prophet of Islam, the Qur'ān alludes to the lesser spiritual state of Hazrat Mūsa, Mūsa, being intoxicated with the Divine Love, expressed his wish to see Allāh openly with his corporeal eyes , but his prayer was rejected outright :

> "When Mūsa came to the place appointed by Us, and His Lord addressed him, he said, Oh , my Lord, show me, that I may behold Thee ! Allāh said; by no means, thou cannot see Me (directly); but look upon the mount; if it stays in its place, then shalt thou see Me. When his Lord manifested on the mount, He made it as dust, and Mūsa fell down in a swoon" (7:143).

But Allāh Himself invites the Prophet of Islam to behold Him. This invitation, which denotes his highest spiritual reach, is alluded to in the Qur'ān :

> "Hast thou not turned thy vision to thy Lord" (25:45).

In this context, the Sheikh Nazm al-Din Razi says that the special friends of Allāh are of two categories, one is the lover of Allāh and other is the beloved of Allāh. The former may not be given whatever he applies for, while the latter has bestowed upon him the most valuable object, even without asking for anything. Hazrat Mūsa was the lover of Allāh, so his prayer was rejected. On the other hand, the Prophet of Islam was both the lover and the beloved; the one who was aimed at in the whole process of creation. That is why Allāh shows him love by making him travel through all the hierarchy of existence up to His Exalted Presence.[29] Mention may be made here that many authentic sayings of the Prophet testify to the idea that the spiritual journey of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj occurred in accordance with the Divine invitation. It is clearly mentioned in the Isrā'-Mi'rāj narratives that during the Miraj, it was asked, at the gate of every heaven, if the Prophet was invited or nor; and the Archangel Jibrā'īl replied that he (the Prophet) had been invited (by Allāh).[30] According to Sheikh Nazm al-Razi, the whole Journey of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj took place primarily out of the Divine mercy and attraction.

Expounding the idea, he points out that to reach the Divine Presence is a unique state indescribable in human language. It is not comparable with any earthly phenomana as bringing one corporeal body near to another body. Allāh eternally transcends such states of relativity. In fact, it is absolutely impossible on the part of a slave to reach the Divine Presence unilaterally; it rather happens primarily out of the Divine grace, mercy and attraction.[31] Thus, the Isrā'-Mi'rāj was totally based on the infinite Divine mercy, initiative and invitation. The Sūfī Sheikh Abul Hasan Kharqani says that there are two roads leading towards the Divine Realm, one is from the Divine to the human and the other is from the human to the Divine. The former is fraught with the continuous Divine guidance, one after another, and the latter is replete with darkness piled upon darkness. Hazrat Mūsa wanted to reach Allāh out of his own intiative and followed his own road without any Divine initiative, guidance and help. The above Qur'ānic Verse indicates this point explicitly. (7:143). It means that Mūsa could not see Allāh because he adopted his own

path. The privilege of Divine vision is not given to one who takes the initiative and asserts his demand; it is rather bestowed upon one who gives up his demand and submits to Allāh whole-heartedly with all his being. [32]

That is why the Prophet of Islam did not follow his own path; he allowed himself to be shown and guided on the Divine path. Allāh himself caused His servant to travel by night (17:1), till he passed through the state of 'Two bow' s-length or ever nearer' (53:10). The Qur'ānic Verse in the chapter al-Nazm, "His sight did not waver, nor did it transgress" (53:17), means, according to the Sūfis , the absolute concentration of the Prophet upon Allāh. In his motionless, steadfast and undivided attention towards Allāh, the Prophet was far superior to Hazrat Mūsa who had asked for vision but could not even look at the Divine manifestation on the mountain without fainting. An Indian poet depicts the idea in an appropriate manner :

> Moses went out of sense by a single manifestation of the Attributes, Thou seest the Essence of the Essence with a smile.[33]

In this context, many Sūfi masters have made comparative studies between the spiritual state of Hazrat Mūsa and that of the Prophet of Islam with a view to pointing out where lie the essential differences between their spiritual states. According to al-Qushairi, Hazrat Mūsa was in a state (ḥal) of "Talwin", but the Prophet of Islam was in a station (maqam) of "Tamkin": while "Talwin" means to make progress from one spiritual state to another, "Tamkin" implies to be firmly fixed in the ultimate station of Unity (Tawḥīd). That is why, Hazrat Mūsa became greatly affected with listening to the Divine Dialogue; but the Prophet of Islam remained totally unaffected by what he had witnessed in the course of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj.[34] According to the author of Kashf al-Mahjub, Hazrat Mūsa fell into swoon (7:143) due to a single Divine Theophany (Tajalli) precisely because he was in a state of "Talwin" or spitiutal intoxication. But the Prophet of Islam, fixed as he was in the station of "Tamkin", was in tune with the constant Divine theophanies, from Makkah to the stage of "Two Bow's Length or even nearer" (53:10), without undergoing any change, while at each moment and in each stage, he became more conscious and aware of the Divine Reality. The Prophet was so totally absorbed in the Divine theophanies that the beauties of the terrestrial and celestial kingdoms could not distract his attention from Allāh, and he remained absolutely indifferent to them. The whole world approached him in the form of a beautiful woman but he turned a blind eye to it. In a total and all-comprehensive Voyage, he encountered eighteen thousand worlds, he was shown the totality of creation, manifested or unmanifested, but nothing could divert his attention from Allāh or make him forget Allāh.[36] This is what The Qur'ānic Verse, "His eye wavered not nor did it transgress" (53:17) means. In fact, he was interested in the Divine Bride and not in the bridal robe, though it was studded with gold and diamonds. He was not at all concerned

with the garden, but only with the "Gardener." [37]

According to al-Qushairi, a "Murid" is one who intends and aims at something and a "Murad" is one who is aimed at. Hazrat Mūsa was a "Murid", so he prayed to Allāh to expand his breast spiritually:

"Oh my Lord, expand my breast (for Islam), (20:25).

The Prophet of Islam, on the other hand, was a "Murad", so Allāh addressed him; "Have We not expanded your breast ? " (94:1).

In other words, the "Murid is the beginner on the spititual path and a "Murad" is one who has reached the end of the path.[38] This point has been expounded in a different manner in the Kashf al-Mahjub.

According to it the "Murid" is one who desires plenitude and beauty, but this is not given; the "Murad" is one upon whom is bestowed plenitude and perfection even without having asked for it. Hazrat Mūsa demanded to see Allāh directly but could not see; the Prophet of Islam did not demand, but he did see Allāh directly. This means that our demand or desire is the greatest veil hiding Allāh from us.[39]

This demand of Hazrat Mūsa, according to Shaikh al-Alawi, a twentieth century sufi master, constitutes an example of self-evident impossibility , an impossiblity which had not been evidently clear to Hazrat Mūsa . For when he asked to see Allāh distinctly with the physical eye, (7:143) , the reply came to him that he could not see Allāh distinctly apart from the world, precisely because Allāh is not in the world, nor outside it; He is neither separate from it nor joined into it .[40] To be more precise, Allāh is not an item among the items of the world; He is not a phenomenon or thing among the phenomena or things of the world . As such, it is sheer impossibility to see Him through a thing, because there is nothing against Him or opposed to Him or comparable to Him. In fact, Allāh has no equal, no partner, no rival, no like and no compeer . It is impossible, therefore, to see Allāh with the corporeal eye, because the normal function of the eye is to see a thing of the world in relation to another thing. Allāh is not a thing; He is irreducible to any item or phenomenon of the world. Though immanent everywhere, He transcends the entire created order, manifested and unmanifested . Thus, the demand of Hazrat Mūsa is a self-evident paradox, and this is why he fell down senseless when Allāh manifested Himself to the mountain.[41]

The difference between the manifestation of Allāh to the mountain for the sake of Hazrat Mūsa and the direct meeting of Muḥammad with Him, beyond the Lote Tree of the Uttermost End, would seem to be that wheareas Hazrat Mūsa

was unprepared - hence extreme violence attended upon his vision - Muḥammad was fully prepared, inasmuch as the Night Journey culminated in the direct vision of Allāh, which means that his outward eye was spontaneously and perfectly coordinated with his inward eye.[42]

Mention may be made here of a Prophetic Ḥadīth related by Ibn Abbas which seems to be most appropriate and relevant in this context . Ibn Abbas mentions that in the Journey of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj the Prophet had a vision of Allāh both with the physical eye and with the eye of the heart, that Allāh, with his infinite power, co-ordinated the light of his outward eye with the light of his inward eye in such a manner that both became united so harmoniously that there remained no difference between them through the actualization of conplete unity.[43]

To sum up, the Prophet's outward eye, however, was one with his inward eye in having vision of the Divine Essence , so that both functioned in complete harmony and were in tune with the ultimate dimension of Tawḥīd. This implies that his other-worldly sight was united with his earthly sight. All these prove the highest spiritual travail and aspiration of the Prophet which made him deserve the highest spiritual priviledge to the exclusion of all others.The name 'Muhmmad' itself means ' one who is glorified' and indicates the perfection of man, since he surpassed all prophets in intellectual penetration and spiritual realization. Allāh, therefore, praises his spiritual struggle and his sincere concentration:

"His eye wavered not, nor did it transgress" (53:17).

This implies that his outward eye wavered not from what the inward eye beheld, nor did it transgress by going beyond the bounds and turning its attention away fron the Truth but kept its gaze fixed upon Him.[44] Hence the Arabic saying, 'Muḥammad, peace be upon him, is a mortal, but not as any other mortals; he is like a unique jewel among pebbles', seems well justified and appropriate. Likewise, Muḥammad is either a man among men- but not an ordinary man- or the perfect man, cosmic and spiritual symbol, unfathomable Logos.[45] A Sūfī Hadith says: "without Muḥammad, the world would not have been created", [46] and adds further magnitude to the highest spiritual of the Prophet.

Now turning again to the culminating point of the prototypal voyage, it is very clear that the Qur'ān refers to two visions which the Prophet had of the Truth (Allāh) during the Night Journey, one with the inward eye, the eye of the heart , and the other with the outward eye, the eye of the head. The former vision corresponds to the following verse:

"His heart did falsify what it saw" (53:11)

The latter vision accords with the Lote Tree Verse:

> "Verily he saw Him at another revelation, by the Lote Tree of the Uttermost End", ...

In his commentary on these verses, the Shaikh al-'Alawi says that this vision was with the eye of the senses, whereas the previous one had been with the eye of the heart. According to him, the vision with the eye of the senses was more excellent than the vision with the eye of the heart, by virtue of its unification of seperate elements and integration of scattered fragments,[47] that is, by virtue of the unification (Tawḥīd) of all the hierarchy of existence, including matter. This is the deepest significance of the physical presence of the Prophet before Allāh, that matter is capable of being transformed into spirit, precisely because the origin of matter was spirit. Furthernore, it indicates that the Islamic perspective is based on the concept of physical resurrection, that the posthuman life of man is both spiritual and physical. According to the Sheikh, the Qur'ānic verse: "Even here is the Garden of Ultinate Refuge" (53:15) means that the Lote Tree marks the finality of Gnonis or 'Irfan, and he who attains to this point is enshrouded by the Lights of the Divine Presence, nay, the whole creation is enshrouded, so that he sees nothing without seeing Allāh therein.This is the explanation of the verse: "When there enshrouded the Lote Tree that which enshrouded," (53:16) that is, when it was enfolded by the all-enshrouding lights of the Divinity, so that the whole hierarchy of created beings disappeared, the majestic and the lowly, in the dazzling manifestation of the Supernal Divine Light, for Allāh is "the Light of the Heavens and the Earth," (24:35).[48] Very closely related to this is a Prophetic Ḥadīth narrated by Hazrat Anas who said that the Prophet said that "I saw the greatest Light, that is, Divine Light, so that Allāh revealed to me directly what He had desired to reveal."[49] It should be noted here that, according to one of the oldest Islamic commentators (al-Tabari), the Lote Tree is rooted in the Divine Throne and it marks the end of the knowledge of every knower. All beyond it is a hidden mystery, unknown to any save Allāh alone.[50]

This is the culminating state of Tawḥīd attained by the Prophet of Islam. He gathered all his aspirations towards Allāh; he is at heart ever present with Allāh, and he contemplated Allāh in his inmost consciousness without any lapse or interval. In Sūfī terminology, it is called "Gathering of Gathering", which means the contemplation of Essence. In other words, Gathering is the essence of Tawḥīd. That is why Allāh spoke to the Prophet : "You did not throw, when you threw, but Allāh Threw" (8:17). Thus, in the station of 'Gathering of Gathering', the knower in his contemplation sees Allāh in His

Essence and Attributes.[51] In short, the Journey of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj represents the Prophet's realization of the climax of Islamic spirituality which coincides with the state of "Gathering of Gathering". Otherwise expressed, it symbolizes our journey back to Allāh or the realization of the ultimate state of Tawḥīd, that is, "La Ilaha illa Allāh," "There is no Lord but Allāh " or "There is no reality but one Absolute Reality."

This ultimate state of Tawḥīd is the goal of all Marifah or Gonosis; whoever attains to this has reached the desired goal.

Al-Ghazzali depicts this idea in his Mishkat al-Anwar. The Kingdom of One and Onliness is the ultimate point of mortal ascent; there is no ascending stage beyond it, for ascending involves an ascent from and an ascent to. But when plurality has been eliminated and unity is established, relation is effaced , all indications from here to there fall away and there remains neither height nor depth, for there is no height beyond the highest. This is the goal of all goals, the last object of spiritual search, known to him who knows it.[52]

The Prophet 's attainment to this culminating point is identified with his direct meeting with Allāh, a unique,unforeseen and unforseeable meeting referred to by the Qur'ān with the following verse:

> "Verily he beheld, of all signs of his Lord, the greatest". (53:18)

It should be noted here the word 'Sign' in question does not represent any created phenomenon serving as sign, but it is no less than the direct vision of the Light of the Divine Essence. This was the state greater than all his other states, and of it he said: "I have a time when only my Lord sufficeth to contain me". According to an authentic tradition, the Prophet was left alone by the Archangel Jibrā'īl, beyond the Lote Tree of the Uttermost End; he therefore, proceeded alone towards the Divine Presence. Then a spiritual cloud encircled him, a cloud intermingled with innumerable colours, and he prostrated himself before the Divine Presence.[53] According to the Qur'ān:

> "Allāh then revealed to His servant what He revealed". (53:10)

According to al-Qushairi, it was the best moment of his earthly career .[54] The famous poet-philosopher Iqbal maintains that it coincides with the person-to-person encounter with Allāh in the Eternal Divine Now.[55] The author of the Kashf al-Mahjub says that the Prophet expressed his inability to depict the incommensurable magnitude and grandeur of that moment passed in the Divine Presence with his famous utterance:

> "I am unable to comprehend You (Allāh) with praise. You are as You have praised Yourselves".[56]

This is an all-comrehensive utterance expressed in praise of Allāh, for no other praise can be more exhaustive than this expression of the Prophet. It represents the realization of both the Infinitely Other and the Absolutely Oneself. For Allāh, in His utter Transcendence and Inviolable Mystery, encompasses all that is and surpasses all that is. This is an Infinite Dimension where all things die and are reborn in the Divine Unity.[57] The Prophet, thus realized the highest state of spirituality in Islam; he is therefore unsurpassed and unsurpassable.

THE PROPHET AS THE TRUE SERVANT AND THE TRUE VICEGRENT (KHALIFAH)

One of the most important points of this unique meeting is that Allāh refers to the Prophet as His Abd or Servant. (53:10). This implies that 'Servant' is the highest name or the most honourable appellation for a human being in relation to Allāh. Only by being a servant and totally humble, can a man reach Allāh. According to Sheikh Abu Ali Daqqaq there is, for man, no state better than servanthood and there is no attribute for a believer better than that a servant. This is why Allāh addressed the Prophet with the attribute of 'Abd on that Unique occasion of direct meeting. As Lordship or Rububiyyah is an essential and inseparable Attribute of Allāh, likewise, servanthood or 'Ubudiyya is a congenital attribute of the true 'Abd. Thus, the Prophet appeared before Allāh as Abd or servant manifesting his smallness and littleness before the Absolute Greatness of Allāh.But, according to the Qur'ān, man has also been appointed by Allāh to be His Khalifah or vicegerent on the earth. (2:30). This implies that man is essentially two things, 'Abd and Khalifah or Servant and vicegerent; that he cannot be one without the other; and that only a true servant can be a true Khalifah. One is inseparable from the other.

In this context, it is very interesting to note that, during the unique meeting, the greatest gift that was offered by Allāh to the Prophet was Salat, the daily ritual prayer, a prayer which symbolically summerizes the whole Prophetic journey of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj. The ritual prayer involves the phases of rising up vertically, bowing down horizontally and prostration by being extinct before the Infinite Majesty of Allāh. It represents the Isrā'-Mi'rāj in miniature. In prayer, the vertical position expresses the dignity of man as Khalifah; the prostration, on the contrary, reflects his smallness as servant (Abd). In reality, the Isrā'-Mi'rāj makes man aware of the two sides of his being. The Prophet, thus, is the True 'Abd and the True Khalifah, while being the last Messenger.

The most crucial point of this sublime meeting is that it proves the direct revelation from Allāh to the Prophet without any medium. The relevant

Qur'ānic verse indicates person-to-person communication between them. In this context, the Shaikh Nazm al-Din Razi says that the most exalted state of direct revelation from Allāh is not possible until man is delivered totally from the veils encircling the human and angelic states. Hazrat Mūsa in reality could not communicate with Allāh without an intermediary.

The Qur'ān refers to a Tree that acted as a medium of revelation for him:

> "In the sacred hollow, coming from the Tree, Oh Mūsa, I am God, the Lord of all Beings" (28:30).

Likewise, a Tablet has been alluded to by the Qur'ān as the medium through which the knowledge of the Torah was communicated to him (7:145). Even the Prophet of Islam, at the early stage of revelation, used to receive revelation through the medium of Jibrā'īl, precisely because all the veils were not lifted and removed completely. The Qur'ān declares expressly:

> "Truely it is the revelation brought down by the Faithful Spirit upon thy heart "(26:193).

But, at the climax of the Prototypal Voyage of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj, which coincided with the direct meeting with Allāh, all the 70,000 Veils of light and darkness were completely withdrawn and the Prophet had the unique opportunity of receiving direct revelation from Allāh without any intermediary (53:10). He said, "I was given the totality of words, that is, the totality of revelation and knowledge." [58]

The Prophet, thus, underwent a thorough spititual transformation. He was turned into a personification of the Divine Mercy (Rahmah) and was sent back again to the creation as a whole as a manifestation of the Rahmah of Allāh. He went to the Isrā'-Mi'rāj as Muḥammad, but he returned as a personification of Mercy of Allāh to the entire creation.[59] The Qur'ān refers to this expressly : "We sent thee not, but as a Mercy for all creatures." (21:107).

The greatest sign of this Divine Mercy is that the Prophet has brought for all Muslims the Salat- the daily ritual prayer- as an-Isrā'-Mi'rāj gift from Allāh. Salat, in a deeper sense, possesses all the possibilities and potential merits of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj. If the Journey of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj ends in the blessed meeting with Allāh, then in daily Salt one can experience the same meeting with Allāh, provided one realizes Ihsan, total submission to Allāh with absolute devotion, which is the supreme state of Salat, a state which is already a meeting with Allāh, an experience of Eternity and of Paradise. That is why the Prophet used to say: "Oh, Bilal, give me peace and pleasure with the Call to prayer," and again, "In my prayer, there is something which refreshes my eyes"; that

is, his peace lies in prayer, precisely because, it amounts to "Miraj" or meeting with Allāh.[60] The same thing is possible for every Muslim provided he performs Salat with utmost sincerity, that is, Ihsan. This is what the Sūfī Ḥadīth, "The Ritual Prayer amounts to the Heavenly Ascension of the believers" means.

To sum up, the Prophet realized, through the prototypal Voyage of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj, the ultimate state of Islamic spirituality, a state unrealized and unrealized by any other Prophet. The secret of the face-to-face meeting with Allāh and the direct revelation from Him lies in establishing the following points: Firstly, it proves that only the Prophet of Islam succeeded in removing all the veils separating Allāh from man. Secondly, it reestablished the direct link with Allāh - a link that was broken with the expulsion of Adam from Heaven. Thirdly, it proves that the spiritually-physical presence of the Prophet before Allāh means that there will be a "spiritually physical" resurrection. Fourthly, it proves that only the Prophet was the true 'Abd or Servant and, as such, only he was the true Khalifah or vicegerent of Allāh on the earth. Fifthly, it reflects the fact that the Prophet is the last Messenger and so the Qur'ān is the final and total revelation and Islam is the last religion.[61]

ONLY THE PROPHET IS THE PERFECT MAN AND THE BARZAKI (Isthmus) PER EXCELLENCE :

All these ideas led Ibn 'Arabi and other great Sūfī masters to develop the doctrine of al-Insan al-Kamil or the Perfect Man. Al-Insan al-Kamil, according to Ibn'Arabi, is the Reality of Muḥammad, who is the total theophany of the Divine Names. The Perfect Man is the whole of the universe in its oneness.[62] Ibn 'Arabi furnishes a graphic description of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj in his book Shajarat al-Kawn (The Tree of Existence) and concludes that the Prophet realized the 'Supreme Contiguity' to Allāh, a proximity described as the mystery of "Aina wa Baina" (where? or in Between).[63] For Abdal Karim al-Jili, the Perfect Man is Muḥammad himself. He is the axis or pole around which the spheres of existence revolve. He was Perfect Man at the beginning of existence, and he will be Perfect Man at the end of time. There is only one "Logos" - Muḥammad- in the entire cycle of creation.[64] The Prophet, according to Mansur Hallaj, is both the cause and the goal of the whole creation. To give this idea more authority, it was couched in a Ḥadīth Qudsi: "But for you (Muhammed) , I (Allāh) would not have created heavens". The world was created out of the promordial Love for the Prophet Muḥammad. He himself highlighted his extraordinary position. "The first thing Allāh created was my spirit"; "I was a Prophet when Adam was still between clay and water." [65] Very closely connected with this Ḥadīth is the Qur'ānic narrative of the Primordial Covenant (Mithaq al-Ajali) in

which the Prophet of Islam was the first person to recognise Allāh as his Lord. The Qur'ān refers to this, "Am I not Your Lord? Yes,"(7:172) that is why, he was appointed Prophet first of all from the point of view of number, though he was sent as a Prophet last of all in point of time.[66] This means that Muḥammad's, knowledge and awareness of Allāh were the greatest and deepest of all, even in pre-temporal Eternel existence. The following Qur'anic statement seems to affirms this point :

> "Allāh knows best where to place His message" (6:124).

There has developed, thus, among the Sūfis the doctrine of the 'Universal Man' of which the earthly manifestation is the Prophet of Islam; he is the totality of which we are a fragment. On the basis of the Ḥadīth mentioned above, the Prophet , according to the Sūfis, is not only the totality, but also the Origin; in other words, the Prophet the Norm. As totality, he is the whole Man; as Rasul, he links the Absolute with the relative or earth to heaven. But on the plane of the "Ancient Man," the two dimensions cannot be distinguished , because in the origin Heaven and the Earth were one. The Qur'ān may allude to this point ?

> "Do not the unbelievers see that the Heavens and the earth were joined together, but we clove them asunder" (21:30).

The Prophet, thus, represents both universality and primordiality, just as Islam in its deepest meaning is that which is everywhere and that which has always been.[67] The Prophet is above all a synthesis connecting human littleness with the Divine Mystery. He is synthesis, not in the Hegelian sense, but in the sense that it is he who is aimed at in the whole process of the creation. Furthermore, synthesis means here a reconciliation of opposities which is characteristic of Islam and expressly results from its being the last Revelation. This implies that the Prophet appears as a synthesis of all, that is, perfection of all that came before him. He, thus, determines the height of all possible perfection .

To sum up, the Prophet is the goal of creation: only he is the Perfect Man or Universal Man and only he is the True Khalifah as well as the True 'Abd. The Sūfis, therefore, call him the Barzakh (Isthmas / Barrier) per excellence. The Prophet is essentially an isthmus, a point of contact between two worlds or two oceans of Being, the Absolute and the relative, the Creator and the creature, but, at the same time, he is the line of demarcation or barrier between two levels of reality. The Qur'ān seems to alludes to this Point :

> "He (Allāh) has merged the two Oceans meeting together, between them is a barrier which they cannot cross. " (55:20)

The term Barzakh generally means a certain intermediate state in the posthumous becoming of human beings. But in Sūfī interpretation, it has two meanings : One is isthmas, that is, a point of contact between two things; the other is barrier or partition between two things. The Prophet of Islam is an isthmus or a point of contact between two words, the Creator and the creature, and the point is his messengership in relation to Allāh. But, at the same time, he assumes the role of the barrier between the Creator and the creature, or between Allāh and man. By establishing Tawḥīd, the absolute unity of Allāh, the Prophet acts as the insurmountable barrier, a sharp demarcation line, between two realms, two levels of reality, the Absolute and the relative, the Infinite and the finite, Allāh and man. These two oceans of existence therefore cannot mix and merge, although they seem to be merged together, precisely because he is the point of contact between them. This proves that only Tawḥīd, the absolute Unity of Allāh, is truly True and really Real; all else such as Pantheism, Polytheism, Incarnationism, Atheism, etc. are totally false.

This double role of the Prophet affirms his role as the universal Man or the Perfect Man. The Prophet is therefore, the perfect Man, endowed with the best model of human character, reflecting a Heavenly or prototypal mould. The sublime model character of the Prophet constitutes a great theme of the Qur'ān :

"You have indeed perfect example in the messenger of Allāh" (33:21).

"Surely thy nature is of the exalted character" (68:4).

That is why great emphasis has been laid in Islam upon the Prophetic Sunnah, that is, the practical rules of conduct and behaviour established by the Prophet. This implies that there is great merit in imitating the Prophetic Sunnah which is in reality a Divinely guided and chosen way of life and which alone is acceptable to Allāh. The Qur'ān puts tremendous emphasis upon the imitation of the Prophet:

"Whoever obeys the Prophet, obeys Allāh" (4:80).

This is why the love of the Prophet is profoundly sweet and desirable to the Sūfī - a love that constitutes a fundamental element of Islamic spirituality. The Sūfis consider the Prophet as the prototype and model of all virtues so that they imitate him, even in the smallest details of daily life. The Prophet is, as it were, a heavenly mould ready to receive the influx of the intelligence and will of the believer.[68] Ibn 'Arabi, the great Sūfī Sheikh, despite his verbal audacity, did not budge an inch from the Sunnah of the Prophet.

Thus, the Isrā'-Mi'rāj proves that only the Prophet is the Universal Man, the

true servant and the true Khalifah, the leader of all Prophets, and the goal of the whole cosmogonic process. These ideas are given authenticity and confirmation by the following authentic Ahadith of the Prophet :

> "Hazrat Abu Hurairah reported that the Messenger of Allāh said: I shall be the leader of the children of Adam on the Resurrection Day,and the first of those who will come out of the graves and the first of those whose intercession will be accepted." (Muslim) [69].

Hazrat Anas reported that the Messenger of Allāh said:

> I shall be foremost of the prophets in respect of followers on the Resurrection Day, and I shall be the first of those who will knock at the door of paradise." (Muslim).[70]

Thus, the Prophet alone will be the first spokesman before Allāh on behalf of the entire creation on the day of Judgement.

In fine, this prototypal Voyage of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj is a unique miraculous saga of the Prophet of Islam. The most crucial aspect of it is that it was actualized not only spiritually but also physically. The spiritual-physical presence of the Prophet before Allāh indicates, on the one hand, our spiritual and physical resurrection and prefigures, on the other, the end of man, the end of revalation and the end of religion. Islam, thus, as a matter of principle, essentially includes in its framework the most earthly possibilities. Islam is based on Tawḥid, the unity of Allāh. Tawhid is an all-inclusive reality, in which matter and corporeal things are not degraded or despised. For matter or material things is a gradual coagulation of the spirit, for in the beginning was the spirit. Herein lies the greatness of Islam which, through spiritual method, transforms matter into spirit, a spiritual Alchemy which can transforms base metal into gold. The Journey of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj prefigures our journey back to our Divine Source, or more precisely, the return journey of the entire creation to its Divine centre - a movement through which even matter will ultimately flow back to its spiritual reality by a process of ontological transmutation. The spiritual-physical presence of the Prophet before Allāh serves as the ultimate and conclusive proof that man is the noblest creation and the Prophet is the goal of the creation.

CONCLUSION:

This is an extensive account, but by no means an exhaustive one, of the Prototypal Voyage of the Prophet of Islam, known as the Isrā'-Mi'rāj, in the perspective of Sūfism. It is a unique and all-comprehensive journey, because it is at once physical and spiritual, terrestrial and celestial, exoteric and esoteric, microcosmic and macrocosmic etc. One should not compare it with

the inter-planetary space travel of the modern age. Space travel is fundamentally different from that of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj. The modern space programme is totally of human origin, utterly profane in nature, having no transcendental or Divine Orientation. Only temporal gains and advantages are the motives that actuate modern man to undertake such perilous, precarious and precocious travels.

But the Journey of the Isrā'-Mi'rāj was totally different in nature. It was essentially accomplished through a harmonized coordination between Divine inspiration and Prophetic aspiration. In other words, Divine inspiration was the guiding force and Prophetic aspiration was the driving force behind the actualization of this unique Voyage. That is why, Divine Knowledge, Marifah, and Prophetic Love, Mahabbah, were the two ingredients that constituted this sublime journey. With Divine guidance and help the Prophet overcame every obstacle and turned hostile and antagomistic elements into friendly allies. Mulla Sadra Shirazi, the great 17th century Sūfī - theosoph of Persia, says that the Prophet of Islam, with a balanced and harmomious spiritual approach neutralized each opposite with its opposite, and subdued equal by means it's equal, as iron can be cut with iron. [71] This means that, with this spiritual weapon, man can dominate the heavens, for the entire universe has been created for man and subjected to him. As the Qur'ān declares:

"It is He who hath created for you All things that are on earth ." (2:29)

"And He has subjected to you, as from Him,all that is in the Heavens and on the earth" (45:13).

This means that Allāh has already subjugated to man whatever there is in Heaven and on earth, provided man knows the proper spiritual method to actualize it. The Prophet, with his spiritual weapon, has made everything subservient, favourable, agreeable and friendly to him. That is why, in every Heaven, the Prophet was greeted with honour as a Divinely-invited guest, and why he stepped where even the Archangel feared to tread. Thus, the modern concept of the conquest of nature, vigorously asserted by scientific man with much boasting, seems utterly meaningless and even diabolic in nature, when viewed in the context of the Qur'ān and the Prototypal Journey of the Prophet of Islam. This unique Voyage proclaimes for ever before mankind that everything in the Heavens and on the earth is essentially subservient and loyal to man, provided he is a true slave as well as a true Vicegerent of Him who is the Supreme Lord and the Creator of everything in the Heavens and the earth. In fine, it proves that the human state is the most proximate to the Exalted Divine state, a fact which has been expressed in a beautiful Persian Poem by a famous Sūfī Poet, Maḥmūd Shabistary.

A single "mim"divides "Ahad" from "Ahmad;"
The world is immersed in that one "mim". [72]

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Badi-uz-Zaman, Furuj Anfer, Ahadth Mathnawi, Amir Kabir Publications, Tehran, (1347 Solar) pp. 14,15.

2. Sheikh Nazm al-Din Razi, Mirsad al-Ibad, ed, Husain al-Husaini, Majlis Press, Tehran, (1312 Solar), p.95.

3. In the translations of the Quaranic Verses, Ihave folloed Yusuf Ali with some modifications and changes of my own.

4. Martin Lings, A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century, Shaikh Ahmad Al-'Alawi, G. Allen & Unwin, London, p.175; Shaikh Nazm al-Din razi, Mirsad al-Ibad, p.242

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6. Shaikh Nazm al-Din Razi, Mizi, Mirsad al-'ibad, pp.242,243.

7. Martin Lings, Muhammad, his life based on the earliest sources, p.102;

8. Ibn Hisham, al-Sirat al-Nabawiyyah, Vol.II, Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi & Sons, Egypt, 1936 AD/1355 A.H. p.45; Muhammad Idris Kandehlawi, Urdu Sirat Mustafa, Vol.I, Rabbani Book Depot., Delhi, India, 1981 A.D. p.301

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10. cf. Ali ibn Uthman Huzwiri Kashf al-Mahjub, Ed. Muhammad Shafi, Nawai Waqt Press, Lahore, Pakistan, N.D., p.318.

11. Shaikh Nazm al-Din Razi, Mirsad al-Ibad, p.104.

12. Jalal al-Din Suyuti, al-Khasais al-Kubra, Vol.1,p.305.

13. Frithjof Schuon, Sufism Veil and Quintessence, tras. by William Stoddart, World Wisdom Book, USA, 1981, p.135.

14. Abu Al Qasim al-Qushairi, al-Risalat al-Qushairiyyah, ed. by Abdul Halim Mahmud ibn al-Sharif, Egypt, 1966 A.D./1385 A.H. Vol.I, p.33.

15. A. Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, Chapel Hill, (N.C.) 1978, p. 219.

16. The Prophet, on returning from a battle declered : "We have returned from a lesser Holy War (performed with the sword) to the greater Holy War (performed with Invocation)

17. Abu al-Qasim al-Qushairi, al-risalat al-Qushairiyyah, p. Vol. II, p.465.

18. al-Ghazzali, Abu Hamid, Ihya ulum al-Dim, Vol, I, Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi & Sons, Cairo, A.H. 1358/1939 A.D. Excellence of Invocation, p.302.

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21. Abu al-Qasim al-Qushairi, al-Risalat al-Qushairiyyah, Vol. II, p.468.

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23. Shaikh Nazm al-Din Razi, Mirsad al-'Ibad, p.240.

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28. A. Schimmel, Mystical Dimension of Islam, p.220.

29. Shaikh Nazm al-Din Razi, Mirsad al-'Ibad, pp.241,242.

30. Suyuti, Jalal al-Din, al-Khasais al-Kubra, Vol, p.304.

31. 31. Shaikh Nazm al-Din Razi, Mirsad al-'Ibad, p.184.

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34. Abu al-Qasim al-Qushairi, al-Risaralat al-Qushairiyyah, Vol.I, pp.232,233.

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37. cf. ibid, p.422.

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